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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 005709

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SUBJECT: SAUERBREY TOURS ROHINGYA CAMPS, DISCUSSES REFUGEE CONDITIONS WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

REF: DHAKA 03064

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration Ellen R. Sauerbrey visited Bangladesh from August 21 to 23, 2006. During the visit she toured Rohingya refugee camps and met with government and international officials to solicit their views on the refugee situation. She concluded her trip with a meeting with the Minister for Food and Disaster Management to discuss short- and longer-term steps to deal with the Rohingya situation. The trip substantiated UN reports that conditions in the camps are far below international standards, and immediate steps by the GOB are required to prevent further deterioration. END SUMMARY

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UNHCR: ROHINGYA SITUATION CONTINUES TO DETERIORATE
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¶12. (SBU) A/S Sauerbrey visited Bangladesh from August 21 to ¶13. During her stay she held meetings in Dhaka, and also traveled with AMB to the Cox's Bazar area to visit the official Rohingya refugee camps as well as the unofficial "makeshift" camp in Teknaf in the far south of the country.

¶13. (SBU) A/S Sauerbrey met with the heads of the UN agencies in Dhaka at the beginning of her visit. According to UNHCR there are approximately 29,000 Rohingya refugees resident in the two official government camps in southern Bangladesh, at Kutupalong and Nayabara. (The GOB claims only 21,000.) UNHCR said that there were another 100,000 to 300,000 undocumented Rohingyas living in southern Bangladesh, including between 6,000 and 10,000 living in the Teknaf makeshift settlement. According to UNHCR, at least some of the undocumented Rohingyas actually were repatriated in the 1990s and returned to Bangladesh illegally through the porous border because of the poor conditions in Burma.

¶14. (C) UNHCR, UNICEF and UNDP listed a variety of problems at the camps, including acute malnutrition levels of 16.8 percent for children aged six months to five years; problems with food distribution, including the disappearance of eight tons of food rations and favoritism in distribution; and corruption in the camps' administration. UNHCR and the GOB still had not signed their annual sub-agreement. UNHCR said that the GOB was demanding excessive overhead and refusing to release redundant personnel. UNHCR also cited difficulties in

working with the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) in Cox's Bazar, who serves as the local representative of the Ministry for Food and Disaster Management. According to UNHCR, the RRRC has obstructed their work and the work of NGOs in the camps and has been the primary obstacle in improving living conditions in the two camps.

15. (C) The UN Resident Representative Renata Lok Dessalien described the UN's plan to close the camps by as early as 2008 (reftel). The plan calls for repatriation, resettlement in third countries, and integration into Bangladesh. The UN is seeking to get support for a new "fourth" option short of integration known as "self-sufficiency pending return." According to this fourth option, development programs would aim to benefit the whole region and the shorter-term conditions for Rohingyas would be improved. The final goal would still be that they return to Burma when conditions permit. A/S Sauerbrey expressed concern about the fate of refugees if the camps were to close. The UN responded that the dates were something they were "aiming for" and that any plan would require close coordination with the donor community and GOB. A/S Sauerbrey also met with the Delegation of the European Commission, which confirmed to her that they were planning to program one million euros in funding for NGO projects assisting the Rohingyas.

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TEKNAF: "MISERABLE" CONDITIONS
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16. (SBU) Upon arriving in Cox's Bazar the A/S and AMB traveled to the Teknaf makeshift settlement, where between 6,000 and 8,000 unregistered Rohingyas have taken shelter on

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a flood plain between a busy highway and the Naf River. The delegation drove past the shelters in heavy rain. Most "shelters" were little more than plastic sheeting propped up by boards. The paths between the shelters had flooded, and some of the shelters had a foot or more water in them. Several residents of the settlement ran up to the delegation's cars with written requests for help, mostly addressed to the UN.

17. (SBU) The delegation visited a new Medicins sans Frontieres (Holland) clinic near the Teknaf settlement and spoke to MSF staff and patients. UNHCR said that it was the first time that the local government official in charge of the region (the Deputy Commissioner) had permitted NGO assistance in Teknaf. When asked why she chose to live in the makeshift settlement, one Rohingya woman at the clinic said she had been living in Teknaf town, but that locals had driven her out. She said that the local authorities are now keeping them there and will not let them move back into town.

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KUTUPALONG: COLLAPSING SHELTERS, POOR SECURITY
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18. (C) The delegation then proceeded to Kutupalong Rohingya Refugee Camp, one of two official refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar district. The delegation was escorted by UNHCR and the RRRC, Shoyebur Rahman. They visited a ration-distribution facility and a sewing training center run by one of two NGOs permitted to work at the camp. UNHCR described the poor security environment. UNHCR protection officers are only permitted to work in the camps until 5PM, and have been told of outbreaks of violence and a general breakdown in security after nightfall when the guards leave.

19. (SBU) The delegation also saw the shelters where the refugees lived. The delegation had to crouch down to enter the shelters because they had sunk so low, the result of termite damage and the porous ground they were built on. UNHCR informed the delegation that they have been trying to

receive permission from the Ministry and RRRC to repair the shelters. Many shelters were leaking because of the rain, and some appeared to be almost collapsing. In spite of heavy rain, many refugees -- including hundreds of children -- greeted the delegation. One group held a large banner in English asking the UN to improve living conditions and complaining about security and maltreatment. Security was heavy, and government guards prevented many refugees from approaching the delegation, although other refugees managed to give letters (in English) to delegation members.

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INDIFFERENCE FROM THE GOVERNMENT
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¶10. (SBU) At a meeting the following day A/S Sauerbrey told RRRC Rahman that the conditions in the camp were "horrifying." The A/S and AMB said that the conditions in the camps could harm Bangladesh's image in the rest of the world and asked that UNHCR and NGOs be permitted to work there. The RRRC responded that they could not permit the camps to be improved because it would encourage more refugees, and that improved conditions for Rohingyas would fuel resentment with the local Bangladeshis. A/S Sauerbrey and AMB said that they could not agree with this assessment of the situation. The RRRC confirmed that he was retiring in the coming week, and said that his replacement had not yet been named.

¶11. (SBU) In a subsequent meeting with the Deputy Commissioner (DC) Aminul Islam A/S Sauerbrey said that the conditions at the Teknaf settlement were "miserable" and encouraged him to permit more NGOs to work in the area. Islam referred to Rohingyas living in Teknaf as "criminals" because they had illegally entered the country. He said that improvements to the settlement would attract more Rohingyas into Bangladesh. A/S Sauerbrey said that the conditions in Teknaf and the camps were destabilizing the security situation, since there were few options for the Rohingyas. She suggested that international assistance provided to the Rohingyas could be extended to those living around the camps who were also in need, and become part of a strategy for the

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overall development of the region.

¶12. (C) At the close of the trip A/S Sauerbrey met with Ministry for Food and Disaster Management Chowdhury Ibne Kamal Yusef in Dhaka. A/S Sauerbrey said that since Bangladesh was on the Human Rights Commission the poor humanitarian situation in the camps could harm the country's international reputation. The Minister agreed that conditions were "deplorable" and said that he would like to improve conditions but "there are a lot of constraints." When asked what was delaying the signing of the annual sub-agreement between the GOB and UNHCR, the Minister's staff said that it was going to the Prime Minister's office and should be signed within one week to ten days.

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COMMENT
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¶13. (C) There is little common ground between UNHCR and the GOB. Conditions in the camps continue to deteriorate, and the situation in the Teknaf makeshift settlement is becoming a humanitarian emergency. In the short-term there is hope that the signing of the sub-agreement, coupled with the replacement of the RRRC in Cox's Bazar, could pave the way for a minimal improvement in conditions in the official camps. In the heated pre-election environment this issue has little resonance. However, the GOB is proud of joining the Human Rights Council and always remains concerned about its international reputation, and those two points seemed to have some effect, at least at the Dhaka level.

¶14. (C) The new UN proposal, "self-sufficiency pending

return," may be a viable option, provided the new GOB does not view it as a "backdoor" to integration. The GOB is aware that many voluntarily repatriated Rohingyas have simply returned illegally and are now living and working in Bangladesh, so involuntary repatriation will not resolve the problem. The GOB attitude towards the unregistered Rohingyas is inconsistent since it refuses to assist "illegal refugees" yet on the other hand it makes no move to expel them or tighten border security in the region. Significant "interests," linked to local authorities, appear to be benefiting from the presence of cheap Rohingya labor, so there is short-term benefit in maintaining the status quo.

¶15. (U) EMB will continue to monitor the situation with UNHCR and report back, particularly on the developments with regard to the sub-agreement. END COMMENT

¶16. (U) A/S Sauerbrey cleared this cable.
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